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On Metta -- Loving-Kindness Medication

Metta is the name for Loving-Kindness Meditation (LKM). Metta comes from Buddha's language, Pali. Loving-kindness towards other people is called Metta. Here in "the West", mindfulness meditation is used as a psychological treatment as well as a practice.

Everyone I have taught it to told me they benefitted from it. They feel enriched. Often, to give is more enriching than to receive. Metta also has the benefit of some increase in gratitude, compassion, and self-enjoyment. What else does it influence?

- Self-compassion
- Seeing yourself as loving, in contrast to feeling self-reproach or self-criticism
- Reducing compassion fatigue, the mental exhaustion from caring for others or helping others
- Reducing anxiety
- Calmer presence with others
- Enjoyment
- Comfortable enough to sleep better
- Sense of well-being
- Higher pain threshold
- Social connectedness



At the end of this article, I present some research citations on these findings.

This meditation gifts the wish of kindness, peace, health, and freedom from suffering sequentially to one's self, one's family, one's friends, then neighbors and community, then the larger community, then every being. It's important to visualize or imagine the people to whom you are sending these wishes.

It's also important to include difficult people in your life. You can include pets and other animals. You can focus on specific people. You can send loving-kindness and healing to someone in need of it.



“Freedom from suffering” is one of the phrases you might use in this exercise. It seems like an unlikely choice of wording. But, in mindfulness work, it means something enlarged, namely, detachment from beliefs and expectations that cause distress, especially the expectations things that are permanent and should not change. But loss and change are characteristic of our lives. We want to accept change, embrace it with imperturbability. So, it implies adaptability.

For an audio file of LKM, here are three choices by well-known teachers, Ron Siegel and Dan Harris, doing an exercise much like the one below, and Tara Brach, who brings loving-kindness inward to one's self.

<https://drronsiegel.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Loving-Kindness-Meditation.mp3>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhiHCU2CpB0>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VD67kzem7qQ>

LKM Is Easy to Do

Sit with back straight and comfortable. Close your eyes. Gaze downwards to reduce distractions.

Let your feet be flat on the floor or lie on your back. Let your arms and hands be supported on armrests or in your lap or at your sides.

Attend to deep abdominal breathing. Come into the Now, the present moment, by focusing on your breathing.

Notice your chest rise and fall with the breath a few times.

Know the oxygen is traveling everywhere within you, from your lungs, to your heart, to everywhere. Imagine that flow.

Speak the following words slowly with your inner voice, present to the meaning of the words, knowing there is no perfect meditation. Each time you do it, you will vary it a little and your concentration will be better or a little less good. There is no judgment; judgment is an opposite of compassion! Accept whatever happens.

If your mind wanders, accept that the wanderings grabbed your mind, then just gently bring your mind back and repeat the benevolent words of the exercise.

Imagine and visualize the people to whom you are addressing kindness.

1. Start with yourself, as if you were talking to yourself sitting in front of you, perhaps now, perhaps as a child. You may modify the phrases you direct towards yourself.

May I be safe.

May I be happy.

May I be healthy.

May I be free of suffering.

Some additional phrases you can add:

May I accept whatever comes and be forgiving.

May I be peaceful.

May I live with ease.

Go slowly. Take your time. Make each line count. *Feel these sentiments within yourself.*

2. Visualize a loved one or someone you care about, someone easy to appreciate.

May you be safe.

May you be happy.

May you be healthy.

May you live with ease.

Imagine your warmth and compassion flowing from you to them, like a soft aura.

3. Visualize a teacher, guide, or mentor, or a spiritual leader..

May you be safe.

May you be happy.

May you be healthy.

May you live with ease.

4. Visualize someone in your life who is neutral, someone you may not have any feelings about, such as someone in the coffee shop or at work.

May you be safe.
May you be happy.
May you be healthy.
May you live with ease.

5. Visualize a person who is a problem for you, or someone with whom you want a better relationship.

May you be safe.
May you be happy.
May you be healthy.
May you live with ease.

6. Visualize your family or a group that is important to you.

May you all be safe.
May you all be happy.
May you all be healthy.
May you all live with ease.

7. Expand your gift to a larger group. Think of your community, a community you identify with.

May you all be safe.
May you all be happy.
May you all be healthy.
May you all live with ease.

8. Think about everyone, send this to all beings.

May all beings be safe.
May all beings be happy.
May all beings be healthy.
May all beings live with ease.

Sit in silence a moment, coming back to the present place and time slowly. Reflect on your experience.



Recent References on Loving-Kindness and Mindfulness Generally

Asadollah, F., Nikfarid, L., Sabery, M., Varzeshnejad, M., & Hashemi, F. (2023). The impact of loving-kindness meditation on the compassion fatigue of nurses working in the neonatal intensive care unit: A randomized clinical study. *Holistic Nursing Practice*, 37(4), 215–222.
<https://doi.org/10.1097/hnp.0000000000000590>

Helpers are affected by the emotional strain of their work. Neonatal nursing can produce compassion fatigue. LKM had a significant impact on reducing compassion fatigue. This was a daily online practice of LKM.

Dasanayaka, N. N., Sirisena, N. D., & Samaranayake, N. (2023). Associations of meditation with telomere dynamics: A case–control study in healthy adults. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1222863.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1222863>

Telomeres are the ends of chromosomes. Aging is associated with reduction in telomere length. The authors report meditators had longer telomeres. These were people who meditate extensively. But the idea that mindfulness is beneficial at the chromosomal level is valuable.

Dubey, A., & Muley, P. A. (2023). Meditation: A promising approach for alleviating chronic pain. *Cureus*, 15(11), e49244. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.49244>

Described the impact of meditation practices on chronic pain and stress. The authors describe some brain mechanisms that may be involved. The following table in the article is of interest.

Meditation Technique	Description
Mindfulness	Focuses on being fully present in the moment, observing pain without judgment, and promoting self-acceptance. It encourages non-reactive awareness to reduce suffering
Guided Imagery Meditation	Involves creating calming mental images to distract from pain, induce relaxation, and promote a sense of well-being. Participants visualize soothing scenes or experiences
Body Scan Meditation	A systematic process of directing attention to each part of the body, often starting from the toes and moving up, to increase body awareness and release tension or discomfort
Transcendental Meditation	A mantra-based practice that involves silently repeating a specific word or phrase to quiet the mind and attain a deep state of relaxation, potentially reducing pain perception
Loving-Kindness Meditation	Focused on cultivating feelings of compassion and kindness, it can improve emotional well-being and reduce pain-related emotional suffering
Zen Meditation	Involves seated meditation with a focus on breath and posture, emphasizing a detached, non-judgmental awareness that can help individuals cope with chronic pain more effectively
Vipassana Meditation	A form of insight meditation, it encourages the observation of bodily sensations, thoughts, and emotions, promoting a deeper understanding of pain and its impermanence
Yoga Meditation	Yoga meditation is a combination of breathing exercises and physical postures with meditation

Gu, X., Luo, W., Zhao, X., Chen, Y., Zheng, Y., Zhou, J., Zeng, X., Yan, L., Chen, Y., Zhang, X., Lv, J., Lang, Y., Wang, Z., Gao, C., Jiang, Y., & Li, R. (2022). The effects of loving-kindness and compassion meditation on life satisfaction: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, 14(3), 1081–1101. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12367>

Looked at LKM and life satisfaction and found a small effect. As in several other studies referenced her, LMK was more helpful when compared to control groups that are not receiving an intervention, are just doing their usual routines, and less helpful against control groups receiving an active intervention.

Kearney, D. J., Malte, C. A., Storms, M., & Simpson, T. L. (2021). Loving-kindness meditation vs cognitive processing therapy for posttraumatic stress disorder among veterans: A randomized clinical trial. *JAMA Network Open*, 4(4), e216604. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.6604>

Compared group cognitive processing therapy for PTSD to LKM for PTSD in veterans. It turned out at a 6 month follow up, both groups were about equally effective at producing moderate improvement..

Keng, S. L., Smoski, M. J., & Robins, C. J. (2011). Effects of mindfulness on psychological health: A review of empirical studies. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 31(6), 1041-1056.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2011.04.006>

Positive effect of mindfulness as a practice and as a therapy on psychological health, finding increased well-being, less symptoms, better overall self-regulation.

Kirby, J. N., Tellegen, C. L., & Steindl, S. R. (2017). A meta-analysis of compassion-based interventions: Current state of knowledge and future directions. *Behavior Therapy*, 48(6), 778-792.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.beth.2017.06.003>

Found moderate improvement from compassion-based practices on increasing compassion, self-compassion, well-being, and lowering depression, anxiety, distress.

Galante, J., Galante, I., Bekkers, M.-J., & Gallacher, J. (2014). Effect of kindness-based meditation on health and well-being: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 82(6), 1101-1114. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037249>

Reviewing 22 studies, they found moderate reduction in depression and increases in mindfulness and self-compassion and positive emotions.

Luberto, C. M., Shinday, N., Song, R., Philpotts, L. L., Park, E. R., Fricchione, G. L., & Yeh, G. Y. (2017). A systematic review and meta-analysis of the effects of meditation on empathy, compassion, and prosocial behaviors. *Mindfulness*, 9(3), 708-724. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-017-0841-8>

Small to medium effects were found for empathy and positive prosocial (socially beneficial) emotions. Most studies use healthy subjects.

Reilly, E., & Stuyvenberg, C. (2022). A meta-analysis of loving-kindness meditations on self-compassion. *Mindfulness*, 13(4), 1086-1103. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-022-01972-x>

Self-compassion increased moderately.

Wakelin, K. E., Perman, G., & Simonds, L. M. (2021). Effectiveness of self-compassion-related interventions for reducing self-criticism: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.2586>

Self-criticism is associated with more mental health challenges, so self-compassion would be an important shift. Compassion-based interventions reduced self-criticism.

Zeng, X., Chiu, C., Wang, R., Oei, T. P. S., & Leung, F. Y. K. (2015). The effect of loving-kindness meditation on positive emotions: A meta-analytic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6, 1693. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01693>

LKM moderately improved positive emotions.

Zheng, Y., et al. (2023). Effects of loving-kindness and compassion meditation on anxiety: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Mindfulness*, 14(3), 345-359. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-023-02121-8>

LKM has a small positive effect on lowering anxiety. The effect is stronger when other mindfulness exercises are used in conjunction with LKM.

Shorehaven Behavioral Health is a major mental health clinic and training center with therapy offices in Brown Deer, Greenfield, and Mt. Pleasant, and also offering telehealth throughout Wisconsin. We specialize in challenging cases and rapid access to services. In addition to depression, anxiety, behavioral problems, and most other psychological problems, we work extensively with children & families and with substance use problems. Our DBT program has openings for three groups – for younger adolescents, older adolescents, and adults. We also accept referrals for substance abuse care from clinicians who are not comfortable with that population. Call 414-540-2170.

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